



NEWS ALERT – Here Comes Peter Cottontail

From: Kittery Land Trust
Date: February 25, 2010

Subject: Wildlife management operation; **rehabilitation of the endangered New England Cottontail rabbit**
Where: Seapoint Road, Kittery Point, ME – Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge / U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
When: Ongoing project. Forestry operation complete, Green-up phase in process

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Kittery Point residents and visitors may have noticed or heard what appears to be a small logging operation off of Seapoint Road. While the Kittery Land Trust has had no part in this activity, many have expressed concern to the Trust about what appears to be destructive to an area thought to be conservation land. As an organization dedicated to the conservation of our town's natural areas, the Kittery Land Trust would like to share some information about this potentially disconcerting activity.

The Seapoint Road area affected is part of the Braveboat Harbor Division of the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge, which is managed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS). The activity is part of a well-planned effort to actively manage the natural habitat for the New England Cottontail rabbit, the only cottontail native to New England. The New England Cottontail is already an endangered species in the state of Maine, and is now a candidate for the Federal Endangered Species



List. Restoration of this cottontail species in the area would in turn support the presence of other sub-scrub species, including a declining population of migratory birds such as the American Woodcock, the Chestnut-sided Warbler, the Prairie Warbler and the Eastern Towhee. Over one dozen agencies in the state of Maine are working together towards the common goal of facilitating the recovery of the New England Cottontail, guided by the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.

Loss of habitat is the primary reason for the sharp decline (more than 80%) of the New England Cottontail population since the 1960's. The USFWS is therefore focused on reviving the cottontail's natural habitat; thick, low-growth shrubland and thicket. Unlike other rabbit species in the region, the New England Cottontail is less able to sense predators from far

away, so a sheltering habitat is important to its survival. Naturally, the presence of shrubland has declined while forest habitat has grown where agricultural fields and pastures once existed. The Seapoint Road cottontail restoration project aims to create a 25-acre patch of shrubland, which research suggests is sufficient to support the species' long term survival. Of this goal, 15 acres of shrubland previously existed, and 10 acres is being added by the current project. The forestry operation phase of the project has been completed, setting the stage for the "green up" phase, which includes planting approximately 1,500 shrubs. If all goes well, the New England Cottontail population in the area should start "hopping" this spring!

Melissa Paly, Vice President of the Kittery Land Trust, remarked "While it isn't picture perfect along Seapoint Road right now, we support the measures being taken by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to restore habitat for the New England Cottontail and associated shrubland species. It's a good reminder to our own organization that being good stewards of conserved land sometimes means more than just leaving it alone."

Additional Resources

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service works with partners to restore habitat for the New England cottontail. If you would like to learn more about what you can do to help, read or download the Landowner's Guide to New England Cottontail Habitat Management at <http://www.edf.org/article.cfm?contentID=8829>.

For Frequently Asked Questions about the New England Cottontail, please see <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/indepth/rabbit/NE%20Cottontail%20FAQs.pdf>

About Kittery Land Trust

The Kittery Land Trust (KLT), in collaboration with landowners, citizens and the Town, works to conserve and steward Kittery's natural areas, through its own local efforts and through collaboration with other conservation organizations that share common goals. KLT is a not-for-profit, member-supported organization that currently protects nearly 400 acres of woodland, marsh and rocky coastline throughout Kittery. Its interests center on retaining ecosystem functions including wildlife habitat and water quality, creating educational and recreational opportunities for residents and visitors, and preserving the aesthetic beauty of our lands and waterways – all of which play a role in supporting the local economy. To learn more about KLT's activities, how to get involved or how you can provide needed support to the Trust, please visit www.kitterylandtrust.org

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